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A STATISTICAL STUDY OF POOR RELIEF IN
MASSACHUSETTSBY KATHERINE E. HOWLAND, *Smith College*

Statistics relating to the nature and extent of poor relief have been compiled with far greater thoroughness in England than in America.¹ The central government of the United Kingdom gathers statistics of the number of paupers in institutions and also of the number in receipt of outdoor relief. Not only is there no central body of our federal government which collects statistics on poor relief, but in a large number of states not even figures are available for all the counties. In England and in Wales the total public expenditure for the support of the poor is also carefully ascertained annually, while in this country only a few of the states gather statistics relating to the amount expended from the public funds for the relief of the poor.¹ The field for historical investigation of poor relief in the United States is therefore limited to a few of the older states where records have been kept for a considerable period of years. It is the purpose of this study to discover if possible any tendencies relating to the nature and extent of poor relief in Massachusetts, where statistics relating thereto are available for a period of over fifty years, and incidentally to investigate the methods employed in recording the data bearing upon this subject.

Questions at once arise as to the percentage of the population of Massachusetts dependent upon public relief; the age, sex, and nationality of the recipients; the nature of the relief given; and the cost involved. Trends and analyses of the variability of these factors over a period of years may be expected to indicate significant aspects of the historical development of poor relief in Massachusetts. By attempting correlations of the percentage of the population in receipt of relief with such measures of business conditions as bank clearings or commercial failures, and average wages, we may still further investigate this problem of poverty.

The number per thousand of the population which received public relief during the years 1892 to 1920 is shown in Table I.² Vagrants, the insane, and the feeble-minded are intended to be excluded from this enumeration, but owing to imperfect methods of classification and to differences in diagnosis this exclusion is incomplete. Previous to the

¹ Gillin, J. L., *Poverty and Dependency*, pp. 26-39. New York: The Century Co., 1921.

² Annual Reports of the State Board of Charity of Mass. 1875-1920. State Printers, Boston. This source was used throughout for all statistics of poor relief.

formation of the State Board of Insanity in 1898 the care of the insane was one of the main functions of the State Board of Charity, and therefore no great need was felt for differentiating the insane from the poor.

TABLE I
NUMBER OF POPULATION IN RECEIPT OF RELIEF CORRELATED WITH
BUSINESS CONDITIONS

Year	Total no. in receipt of relief in Mass.	Number per 1,000 in receipt of relief	Number of cases of vagrancy	Number in receipt of out-relief	Ratio of out-relief to total relief	Indexes of wages per week in 17 industries in the U. S.	Per cent per firms in business in the U. S. of commercial failures
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII ¹	VIII ²
1892	56,478	24.10	147,299	.....	.....	103.3	0.88
1893	54,819	22.88	141,481	.....	.....	102.2	1.28
1894	79,323	32.41	230,788	.....	.....	96.9	1.25
1895	82,544	33.01	304,244	.....	.....	97.8	1.09
1896	71,893	28.07	228,122	.....	.....	98.2	1.31
1897	78,122	29.79	241,230	.....	.....	98.2	1.26
1898	85,273	31.78	232,898	.....	.....	98.6	1.10
1899	85,591	32.28	207,326	.....	.....	101.3	0.81
1900	76,001	27.09	164,700	.....	.....	104.3	0.92
1901	75,913	26.68	170,986	.....	.....	107.2	0.90
1902	73,982	25.65	159,477	.....	.....	110.9	0.93
1903	72,094	24.65	129,997	.....	.....	115.5	0.94
1904	71,661	24.18	137,332	.....	.....	117.7	0.92
1905	81,413	27.10	117,513	.....	.....	120.3	0.85
1906	69,998	22.80	44,003	.....	.....	126.1	0.77
1907	64,310	20.50	26,224	.....	.....	130.7	0.82
1908	69,863	21.81	33,518	.....	.....	126.5	1.08
1909	78,923	24.13	32,798	.....	.....	125.8	0.80
1910	68,923	20.66	29,972	.....	.....	130.2	0.80
1911	71,441	20.97	32,300	.....	.....	132.3	0.81
1912	74,401	21.38	16,177	52,537	0.7061	135.7	0.98
1913	71,411	20.11	14,912	51,423	0.7061	.....	0.99
1914	86,425	23.86	16,190	65,059	0.7528	.....	1.10
1915	120,905	32.74	52,961	97,484	0.8063	.....	1.32
1916	118,012	31.68	31,662	95,935	0.8129	.....	0.99
1917	98,957	26.34	11,533	78,090	0.7892	.....	0.80
1918	89,582	23.64	11,366	72,936	0.8142	.....	0.58
1919	89,273	23.36	8,404	71,642	0.8025	.....	0.38
1920	75,868	19.69	3,082	62,770	0.8274	.....	....

By Pearson's formula:

$$r_{III, VII} = -0.833 \quad P.E. = \pm 0.067$$

$$r_{III, VIII} = +0.426 \quad P.E. = \pm 0.155$$

Correlation after elimination of five-year moving average trend in each variable:

$$r_{III, VII} = -0.622 \quad P.E. = \pm 0.149$$

$$r_{III, VIII} = +0.438 \quad P.E. = \pm 0.165$$

¹ King, W. I., *The Wealth and Income of People of the United States*. London: The Macmillan Co., 1915. p. 203.

² Babson, R. W., *Half a Century of Business as Indicated by Babson's Business Barometers*. 1920.

Even had the attempt been made, knowledge of mental disease and defect has until recently been too meager to admit of a skilled diagnosis of insanity or of feeble-mindedness. The exclusion of vagrants is almost equally difficult. Almshouses formerly served as winter quarters for many a tramp and as more temporary lodging houses for many more.¹

¹ Kelso, R. W., *The History of Public Poor Relief in Massachusetts*, p. 113. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1922.

Vagrancy formerly presented such a serious problem to the administrators of poor relief that it is a subject worthy of special consideration. The number of cases of vagrancy for the years 1890 to 1920 are shown in Table I, column IV. In 1895 the cases of vagrancy reached the high-water mark of 304, 244, which should be compared with the cases in 1920 numbering only 3,082. The virtual disappearance of this problem is even indicated by Poole's *Periodical Index*. In the volume for 1900-1904 references are given to over 30 articles on the tramp problem, while in the index for 1918 the only reference to tramps is, "See Walking Trips." The word "tramp" does not even appear in the 1919 index.

Vagrancy has waned before the steady growth of public opinion resulting in the gradual development of more scientific methods of relief and of prevention. Formerly the general attitude was, "Why should we pay the tramp's board bills in jail? Tell him to move on." This universal evasion of the problem is well illustrated in a report from the Associated Charities of Lawrence, Kansas, which states that "the custom here with vagrants is (1) arrest; (2) fine; (3) as they have no money, they are put to work on the rock pile; (4) no guard; (5) the vagrants run off; (6) which is what was planned."¹

Column VI, in the first table, showing the ratio of the number in receipt of outdoor relief to the total number relieved, probably represents a growing tendency away from institutional care; but the lack of comparable figures for indoor and outdoor relief has so narrowed the limits of comparison that the results do not warrant the determination of a general trend. It is worth noting, however, that the state has adopted a definite policy of outdoor relief for dependent children which is known all over the world as the Massachusetts plan of child placement. The state now has 7,000 minor wards, and of these wards all children who are placeable are located in foster family homes.²

Possible correlation of the number in receipt of relief with some measure of business prosperity is suggested by a comparison of Wesley C. Mitchell's ³ interpretation of business cycles with the rise and fall in the amount of poor relief as shown in Table I. It appears that a period of business prosperity is shortly followed by a fall in the amount of poor relief, while a business depression such as occurred in the years 1893-94, 1896, 1903-4, 1907-8, and 1913 is soon followed by a rise in the curve showing the number per thousand inhabitants who receive relief. The following statement, by Dr. Mitchell, of business cycles merits a close comparison with Table I, column III.

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 101, pp. 744-53.

² Kelso, R. W., *op. cit.*, pp. 163, 186.

³ *Business Cycles*, p. 88. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1913.

- 1892 General business prosperous; heavy gold exports.
- 1893 Panic; acute in May to October.
- 1894 Deep depression.
- 1895 Revival in the summer; followed by relapse.
- 1896 Return of depression; panicky conditions in financial markets.
- 1897 First half dull; second half, great improvement on crop situation.
- 1898 Prosperity rising rapidly.
- 1899 High tide of prosperity in general business.
- 1900 Slight pause in activity, followed by outburst of speculation in the autumn.
- 1901 Prosperity in general business.
- 1902 Prosperity continued.
- 1903 Financial liquidation; "rich man's panic"; general business still active.
- 1904 Mild industrial depression.
- 1905 Rapid gain in prosperity.
- 1906 High tide of prosperity.
- 1907 Crisis and severe panic in October and December.
- 1908 Deep depression in trade and industry.
- 1909 Recuperation; marked in second half of the year.
- 1910 Return of depression in second half of the year.
- 1911 Mild depression.

Of the correlations shown in Table I, that between the number in receipt of relief and index of wages in 17 principal industries in the United States computed by King (see explanation of source following the tabulation) shows the highest degree of association, there proving to be a negative correlation of 0.83 or, what is of greater significance, of 0.62 when the correlations are made of deviations around the trend lines. According to this association, variability in the number in the receipt of relief bears a distinct relation to the average wage paid. That is, there are a large number of persons who are not hopelessly and inherently paupers but who are dependent upon the marginal wage paid in industry. In times of prosperity these persons are independent. However, the wage which supports them is not only insecure, but it probably is also too meager to allow for saving against times of unemployment. The percentage of commercial failures appears to be less closely connected with the number of persons in receipt of relief, but the correlations found serve to substantiate the fact of a close connection between business prosperity and the extent of poor relief.

Let us now consider the age, sex, and nationality of the recipients of relief. Table II shows the age distribution of the recipients of relief for the year 1915 only. A close comparison, however, of the years from 1912 to 1920 reveals a lack of variability in the age distribution from year to year and shows that the mode of each year's distribution lies in the group from 5 to 9 years of age. Aside from any consideration of the age grouping of the general population, this fact is of great importance, showing as it does the need of a constructive program of poor

relief with the emphasis placed upon child welfare. Causes for the rise in the percentage of the total number in receipt of relief occurring in the age groups from 20 to 34 might well be sought in a study of immigration and of the conditions in modern industry where the productive capacity of the worker reaches its maximum at an early age.

TABLE II
AGE DISTRIBUTION OF RECIPIENTS OF RELIEF AND OF THE GENERAL
POPULATION

Age	1915				
	Number in receipt of relief	Per cent of total number in receipt of relief	General population	Per cent of general population	Per cent of general population in receipt of relief
0-5	13,524	11.19	363,297	9.84	3.72
5-9	18,563	15.35	335,855	9.10	5.53
10-14	16,786	13.88	302,779	8.20	5.54
15-19	9,960	8.23	314,514	8.52	3.17
20-24	5,428	4.49	359,272	9.73	1.51
25-29	5,614	4.64	346,076	9.37	1.62
30-34	6,664	5.51	299,217	8.10	2.23
35-39	7,672	6.34	289,729	7.84	2.65
40-44	6,963	6.35	252,936	6.85	2.75
45-49	5,577	4.61	217,510	5.89	2.56
50-54	4,425	3.66	182,789	4.94	2.42
55-59	4,118	3.41	134,658	3.65	3.06
60-64	3,733	3.09	104,707	2.83	3.57
65-69	3,340	2.76	76,268	2.06	4.38
70-74	2,619	2.17	54,374	1.47	4.82
75-79	1,840	1.52	33,035	0.89	5.57
80-84	1,075	0.89	16,635	0.45	6.47
85-89	435	0.36	6,601	0.18	6.59
90-94	135	0.11	1,721	0.05	7.84
95-99	36	0.03	350	0.01	10.29
100-	10	0.01	46	0.001	21.79
Unknown	2,388	1.98	941	0.03	....
Total	120,905	100.00	3,693,310	100.000	....

Comparison of the age distribution of the recipients of relief for the year 1915 with that of the total population for the same year shows not only that the greatest frequency is found in the age group from 5 to 9 years and that there is a marked increase again from 20 to 44, but also that these maximum frequencies are out of proportion to the distribution of the total population. What are the chances that at a given age an inhabitant of Massachusetts will be a recipient of public relief? This question is answered in part by the last column of Table II. Five and one-half per cent of the general population in the age groups of 5 to 10 receive relief, as compared with $1\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of persons from 20 to 24, and 21 per cent of those over 100 years of age.

The distribution of the recipients of relief according to sex from 1912 to 1920 shows that of the total number in receipt of relief the proportion of females has risen from 50 to 54 per cent. It is impossible to determine what has been the change in the general population during that period. According to the state census of 1915, 51 per cent of the total population were females; but of the total number in receipt of relief during the same year, only 50.23 per cent were females.

The recipients of relief during the years 1912 to 1920 are classified according to country of birth in Table III. It will be noted that from 1912 to 1916 a higher percentage of the foreign-born were in receipt of relief than of the native-born, after which period the conditions are reversed. This change may well be the result of the stoppage of immigration during the world war. Immigration to the United States reached the high figure of 1,218,480 in the year 1914, while the following year it dropped to 326,700 and continued steadily to decrease until 1918, when the total gross immigration numbered only 110,618.¹

Russian-Polish farmers are popularly supposed to exceed by far the native population in thrift and efficiency. For this reason it is surprising to note the relative position of the Russian-Polish in this table, especially when it is taken into consideration that immigration from these countries is so comparatively recent. There is, therefore, a much smaller proportion of this nationality in the upper age groups than of the native population. It might prove enlightening to supplement this data with a study of Polish and Russian occupations in Massachusetts.

Obviously, the general form of each distribution in Table III is accounted for by the increase in the receipt of relief throughout the entire population during the war. Statistics as to the nationality of the recipients of relief are not available for a consecutive period of years before the war and it is therefore impossible to determine the normal trend for the different nationalities. At the close of the war a marked tendency to cluster more closely around the average will be noted. It is interesting to observe that the smallest rates of poor relief are found among those nationalities most sparsely represented in the total population. Perhaps they represent a more selected group than those nationalities which are more numerous.

The cost of poor relief is shown in Table IV. Although the program of poor relief is far more elaborate than it was in 1878, contrary to popular opinion, the cost to each inhabitant has not noticeably increased. The real effect of the war upon the cost of poor relief is obscured by the war inflation of currency. When this inflation is only

¹ Babson's Charts.

TABLE III
RECIPIENTS OF RELIEF CLASSIFIED BY COUNTRY OF BIRTH¹

Birthplace	Number per thousand given relief									
	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	
Native.....	19.13	18.69	22.77	31.90	31.37	26.88	24.64	24.89	21.66	
Foreign.....	22.39	20.78	24.79	31.37	33.73	26.60	23.41	22.59	18.07	
Canada.....	22.53	22.43	24.33	32.98	31.03	17.23	22.69	17.00	16.01	
England.....	23.15	22.24	24.91	31.93	29.83	24.28	19.94	17.45	13.62	
Germany.....	13.24	13.97	14.08	19.00	18.15	14.84	11.71	11.94	8.33	
Ireland.....	43.98	42.11	47.54	53.83	51.31	44.44	37.01	34.30	27.82	
Italy.....	12.29	14.44	20.39	37.66	34.41	21.35	21.26	23.25	19.98	
Russia.....	15.13	19.39	26.99	46.88	46.60	34.54	33.31	35.40	29.30	
Scandinavia.....	8.91	8.51	9.69	13.38	13.12	9.43	11.25	10.62	7.32	
Scotland.....	15.39	16.30	19.48	23.56	22.68	18.51	17.64	14.18	10.69	
All others.....	15.22	8.90	12.79	23.70	24.36	28.07	16.78	20.92	13.51	

¹ The distribution of the population by nationality could only be secured for the census year 1915, and as these figures were used in computing the percentage of the population according to nationality that received relief during the years 1912 to 1920, the results are subject to correction for every year except 1915.

roughly compensated for, as indicated in the table by the use of Babson's index of inflation, the rise in expenditure then appears similar to the increase in the amount of poor relief during the war, and of the same temporary character. It should, however, be noted, by comparison with Table I, column III, that the increase in cost during 1919 and 1920 is not accompanied by an increase in the receipt of poor relief.

TABLE IV
COST OF POOR RELIEF IN MASSACHUSETTS

Year	Total net cost ¹	Cost per inhabitant	Consumer's index of inflation ²	Uninflated cost (consumer's)	Wholesaler's index of inflation ²	Uninflated cost (wholesaler's)
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
1878.....	\$1,098,642	\$0.787				
1879.....	1,480,273	0.843	....	....	...	....
1880.....	1,412,388	0.793				
1881.....	1,370,000	0.718	....	....	...	....
1882.....	1,426,702	0.772	....	....	...	....
1883.....	1,496,032	0.797	....	....	...	....
1884.....	1,542,824	0.808	....	....	...	....
1885.....	1,700,520	0.875	....	....	...	....
1886.....	1,720,795	0.891	....	....	...	....
1887.....	1,751,888	0.844	....	....	...	....
1888.....	1,826,872	0.849	....	....	...	....
1889.....	1,811,805	0.822	....	....	...	....
1890.....	1,878,710	0.839	....	....	...	....
1891.....	1,808,162	0.777	....	....	...	....
1892.....	1,869,244	0.789	....	....	...	....
1893.....	1,903,534	0.790	....	....	...	....
1894.....	1,993,263	0.814	....	....	...	....
1895.....	2,154,573	0.892	....	....	...	....
1896.....	2,190,515	0.858	....	....	...	....
1897.....	2,272,488	.867	....	....	...	....
1898.....	2,372,661	0.887	....	....	...	....
1899.....	2,522,410	0.919	....	....	...	....
1900.....	2,492,060	0.902	....	....	...	....
1901.....	2,551,074	0.898	....	....	...	....
1902.....	2,694,891	0.933	....	....	...	....
1903.....	2,780,751	0.952	....	....	...	....
1904.....	2,957,909	0.999	....	....	...	....
1905.....	3,096,035	1.033	....	....	...	....
1906.....	3,460,633	1.127	....	....	...	....
1907.....	3,240,763	1.034	....	....	...	....
1908.....	3,409,418	1.064	....	....	...	....
1909.....	3,712,689	1.135	....	....	...	....
1910.....	3,486,292	1.045	....	....	...	....
1911.....	3,345,776	0.961	....	....	...	....
1912.....	3,345,776	0.961	....	....	...	....
1913.....	2,846,085	0.801	....	....	...	....
1914.....	3,118,497	0.861	100	\$0.861	100	\$0.861
1915.....	4,047,471	1.096	100.5	1.090	101	1.085
1916.....	4,586,091	1.231	108.7	1.132	120	1.026
1917.....	4,663,940	1.241	131.7	0.942	187	0.664
1918.....	5,165,067	1.363	152.2	0.895	193	0.706
1919.....	5,846,121	1.504	172.2	0.873	219	0.687
1920.....	7,684,160	1.994	191.4	1.042	230	0.871

¹ Total net cost does not include cost of upkeep. Owing to the frequent obscurity in the distinction between state expenses and those of cities and towns, part of which are reimbursed by the state, the figures in this column are in the nature of a close estimate. For the year 1911, the state expenses are not given. By way of explanation it is stated in the annual report that "for the present report, comparable data of state care are not available."

² Babson's Reports.

Even this brief study reveals complexities in the analysis of poor relief. General business conditions, as measured roughly by bank clearings or commercial failures, and more especially by index of wages, affect the problem to an extent most difficult to determine. Age, sex, and nationality involve still other causes of variability and present other differences which should modify any program of relief. Study of poor relief from the standpoint of expenditure is complicated by the difficulty of securing a suitable index of depreciation of currency. Furthermore, questions as to the nature and effect of the relief given should not be considered apart from the growth and changes in public opinion, viewed as a main factor affecting the attitude of the recipients of relief as well as directing the public policy.

Accurate and complete records are essential to scientific study of such a problem as poor relief. Frequent changes in the method of securing and of recording data in the state reports at present make much valuable material incomparable. Some such plan as the following would render possible an increase in scientific knowledge which would be valuable in the administration of poor relief. The scheme should be drawn up by a federal board and adopted by every state that each may profit by the experiences of the others:¹

I. Schemes for tabulation should be drawn up by a committee of expert statisticians to be followed under penalty of law for five years at least.

II. These schemes should cover all tabulations made by the towns and cities which enter into the state report, as well as those of the state, and also the method of final presentation of the combined material in the Annual State Reports.

III. At the close of the period prescribed by law, as recommended in I, the committee should incorporate useful suggestions into the scheme of tabulation to be followed during the next period. These changes should be clearly explained to all persons engaged in the compilation of statistics that are in the state report, as well as in the annual report itself, and the nature of the changes should be so stated that the data in any two consecutive periods may be rendered easily comparable.

IV. Special standard requirements needing greater emphasis than hitherto are as follows: (a) Outdoor relief should be carefully distinguished from indoor relief. (b) An analysis of new cases should be included as distinguished from the total number of cases. (c) A similar analysis of discharged cases should be made. (d) Classification of costs should be so standardized that the following totals for both the state and for the cities and towns are independent and exhaustive: (1)

¹ Such a scheme is of course impossible under the present legal organization of the United States.

Cost of persons relieved, not including expense of administration and upkeep. (2) Cost of administration and upkeep, the nature of all "incidental" expenses to be clearly specified. (3) Aggregate cost to the state, making due allowances for reimbursements, etc.

V. Summaries of the preceding years should include: (a) A brief comparison with the year directly preceding. (b) A more exhaustive review every 10 years. (c) An exhaustive statistical study every 25 years.